

Crisis Communication Plans Provide the Framework of How to Manage a Crisis Effectively

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What will your firm do in the face of an unexpected emergency? Crisis communication plans provide an organizational framework of who will be responsible for which specific task, when and if a crisis should occur.

The most challenging part of any crisis, whether it is natural or man-made is the reaction of the management. Not only do they have to be prepared to respond quickly **but** respond with the right response. Failure to do so will only lead to spin, not communication, which in turn doesn't mitigate damages but rather causes embarrassment, humiliation, prolonged visibility, and often, unnecessary litigation for the business.

Crises can range from product recalls, an accident in a mine, food contamination, passengers' movement on airline restricted during poor weather, a hacker stealing credit card information, environmental breaches, class action law suits, sexual harassment, or activisms which effect commerce everyday throughout the world. More often than not, crisis occur when least expected. The Institute of Crisis Management defines a crisis as " Any problem or disruption that triggers negative stakeholder reactions that could impact the organization's financial strength and ability to do what it does".

Executives understand that a solid, strong reputation of their company is tied with

bottom-line earnings. Businesses with good reputations are seen as providing their customers with more value and therefore are able to charge premium prices for their products and services. Anything that diminishes this value is of consequence.

Frequently, attorneys whether they are inside or external counsel find themselves in the thick of the crisis, uniquely situated between management and external counsel, and/or other stakeholders with strong interests and involvement in the crisis. By understanding the role of the media, learning how to work effectively with the press, advising clients of the importance of having some sort of crisis plan in place, law firms and attorneys are able to provide additional value to their clients and importantly are setting themselves apart from their competition.

Having a crisis communication plan where both sides: attorneys and public relations firms and/or consultants, not only work cohesively together but understand their respective roles is imperative when client's/organizations reputations are at stake. Oftentimes, regardless of the legal implications of the crisis, perceptions generated with the public can be helpful or detrimental to the client's economic health.

When no plans are in place, and a crisis occurs, improvising and flying by the seat of one's trousers will not minimize damage but rather increase it. A plan that identifies clearly who is responsible for which tasks will impose order, structure and direction rather than having to put out firestorms without having any strategy in place.

Crisis communication plans at their very basic are templates. They provide an organizational framework of who will be responsible for which specific task, when and if a crisis should occur. Without a plan, the left hand won't know what the right hand is doing particularly when the press is knocking on your door. It should outline in detail operational procedures. This includes contact systems; a point person who is coordinating with press and spokesperson (usually the primary attorney, depending on the nature of the crisis) back up spokesperson, and reporters who cover the beat. It will also include how and what to communicate to any other organization, stakeholder or community that has a specific interest and is impacted by the crisis.

It's important to note, that these templates must be fluid. Each crisis will be different with different stakeholders and so adjustments to the plans will be necessary as these are living organisms. However, all of the plans at their very basic level will need the following:

1. Determine who is part of the crisis communication management team. This will include all key individuals and roles assigned to them. All the individuals must have contact details of all the team members.
2. Designated spokesperson with the press. This is the individual who will be the face of organization to the public. Typically there is a fair amount of dialogue between attorneys and spokespersons. The Spokesperson, usually has had a fair amount of media training, or comes from a journalism background.
3. Assign individual/public relations agency to be responsible for all needs and queries of the press. This persons/agency's job is to ensure that all press requests are handled in a timely manner.

4. The legal counsel, spokesperson should have a current media list of reporters who cover your client's beat.
5. Maintain a media log. This should have details of all press that has contacted the organization, what information was sent, when they are expected to get back to you. If there is more than one individual on the coordination team, be clear on which tasks were delegated to whom?
6. The public relations agency should make sure the spokesperson or any other individuals assigned to that role should not talk to external sources until they have and understand all the facts. Otherwise, mistakes will be made, which in turn create negative perceptions.
7. Communicate key messages for all your audiences in a consistent manner, whether they are within the organization or external audiences. The messages must address questions and concerns in language that different stakeholders understand. The tendency is to be objective and use legal language, both of these will work to your disadvantage, the public wants to hear and sense that you understand the gravity and depth of the circumstances.
8. Depending how long the crisis is the public relations agency/consultants should coordinate a regular timetable to meet reporters, keeping them abreast of any latest developments.
9. Maintaining several back up plans, point personal, and other details relating to the particular crisis is a must.
10. Finally, all crisis circumstances whether they are business related or natural disasters need a human face. That means, regardless of how well prepared the organization/client is, it is critical to connect and relate to all the key stakeholders impacted by the situation.

Finally, a good crisis communication plan helps to mitigate and reduce the potential for damage. It is a blueprint for when unexpected events and disasters strike, providing structure for the flow of important information to be communicated to all the key players. Benjamin Franklin summed it up very well, “by failing to prepare you are preparing to fail”

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